

ICONS



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ICONS / BOOK I
THE HUMANITY PROJECT

Pressed by Hand
Circa Spring 2080 ATD

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PROLOGUE

THE DAY

One tiny gray dot, no bigger than a freckle, marks the inside of the baby's chubby arm. It slips in and out of view as she cries, waving her yellow rubber duck back and forth.

Her mother holds her over the old ceramic bathtub. The little feet kick harder, twisting above the water. "You can complain all you want, Doloria, but you're still taking a bath. It will make you feel better."

She slides her daughter into the warm tub. The baby kicks again, splashing the blue patterned wallpaper above the tiles. The water surprises her, and she quiets.

"That's it. You can't feel sad in the water. There is no sadness there." She kisses Doloria's cheek. "I love you, *mi corazón*. I love you and your brothers today and tomorrow and every day until the day after heaven."

The baby stops crying. She does not cry as she is

scrubbed and sung to, pink and clean. She does not cry as she is kissed and swaddled in blankets. She does not cry as she is tickled and tucked into her crib.

The mother smiles, wiping a damp strand of hair from her child's warm forehead. "Dream well, Doloria. *Que sueñes con los angelitos.*" She reaches for the light, but the room floods with darkness before she can touch the switch. Across the hall, the radio is silenced midsentence, as if on cue. Over in the kitchen, the television fades to sudden black, to a dot the size of a pinprick, then to nothing.

The mother calls up the stairs. "The power's gone off again, *querido!* Check the fuse box." She turns back, tucking the blanket corner snugly beneath Doloria. "Don't worry. It's nothing your *papi* can't fix."

The baby sucks on her fist, five small fingers the size of tiny wriggling earthworms, as the walls start to shake and bits of plaster swirl in the air like fireworks, like confetti.

She blinks as the windows shatter and the ceiling fan hits the carpet and the shouting begins.

She yawns as her father rolls down the staircase like a funny rag doll that never stands up.

She closes her eyes as the falling birds patter against the roof like rain.

She starts to dream as her mother's heart stops beating.

I start to dream as my mother's heart stops beating.



1 HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME

“Dol? Are you okay?”

The memory fades at the sound of his voice.

Ro.

I feel him somewhere in my mind, the nameless place where I see everything, feel everyone. The spark that is Ro. I hold on to it, warm and close, like a mug of steamed milk or a lit candle.

And then I open my eyes and come back to him.

Always.

Ro’s here with me. He’s fine, and I’m fine.

I’m fine.

I think it, over and over, until I believe it. Until I remember what is real and what is not.

Slowly the physical world comes into focus. I’m standing on a dirt trail halfway up the side of a mountain—staring

down at the Mission, where the goats and pigs in the field below are small as ants.

“All right?” Ro reaches toward me and touches my arm.

I nod. But I’m lying.

I’ve let the feelings—and the memories—overtake me again. I can’t do that. Everyone at the Mission knows I have a gift for feeling things—strangers, friends, even Ramona Jamona the pig, when she’s hungry—but it doesn’t mean I have to let the feelings control me.

At least that’s what the Padre keeps telling me.

I try to control myself, and usually I can. But I wish I didn’t feel anything, sometimes. Especially not when everything is so overwhelming, so unbearably sad.

“Don’t disappear on me, Dol. Not now.” Ro locks his eyes on me and motions with his big tan hands. His brown-gold eyes flicker with fire and light under his dark tangle of hair. His face is all broad planes and rough angles—as solid as a brambled oak, softening only for me. He could climb halfway up the mountain again by now, or halfway down. Holding Ro back is like trying to stop an earthquake or a mud slide. Maybe a train.

But not now. Now he waits. Because he knows me, and he knows where I’ve gone.

Where I go.

I stare up at the sky, spattered with bursts of gray rain and orange light. It’s hard to see past the wide-brimmed hat I stole off the hook behind the Padre’s office door.

Still, the setting sun is in my eyes, pulsing from behind the clouds, bright and broken.

I remember what we are doing and why we are here.

My birthday. It's my seventeenth birthday tomorrow.

Ro has a present for me, but first we have to climb the hill. He wants to surprise me.

"Give me a clue, Ro." I pull myself up the hill after him, leaving a twisting trail of dried brush and dirt behind me.

"Nope."

I turn to look down the mountain again. I can't stop myself. I like how everything looks from up here.

Peaceful. Smaller. Like a painting, or one of the Padre's impossible puzzles, except there aren't any missing pieces. In the distance below, I can see the yellowing patch of field that belongs to our Mission, then the fringe of green trees, then the deep blue wash of the ocean.

Home.

The view is so serene, you almost wouldn't know about The Day. That's why I like it here. If you don't leave the Mission, you don't have to think about it. The Day and the Icons and the Lords. The way they control us.

How powerless we are.

This far up the Tracks, away from the cities, nothing ever changes. This land has always been wild.

A person can feel safe here.

Safer.

I raise my voice. "It'll be getting dark soon."

He's up the trail, once again. Then I hear a ripple through the brush, and the sound of rolling rock, and he lands behind me, nimble as a mountain goat.

Ro smiles. "I know, Dol."

I take his calloused hand and relax my fingers into his. Instantly, I am flooded with the feeling of Ro—physical contact always makes our connection that much stronger.

He is as warm as the sun behind me. As hot as I am cold. As rough as I am smooth. That's our balance, just one of the invisible threads that tie us together.

It's who we are.

My best-and-only friend and me.

He rummages in his pocket, then pushes something into my hands, suddenly shy. "All right, I'll hurry it up. Your first present."

I look down. A lone blue glass bead rolls between my fingers. A slender leather cord loops in a circle around it.

A necklace.

It's the blue of the sky, of my eyes, of the ocean.

"Ro," I breathe. "It's perfect."

"It reminded me of you. It's the water, see? So you can always keep it with you." His face reddens as he tries to explain, the words sticking in his mouth. "I know—how it makes you feel."

Peaceful. Permanent. Unbroken.

"Bigger helped me with the cord. It used to be part of a saddle." Ro has an eye for things like that, things other

people overlook. Bigger, the Mission cook, is the same way, and the two of them are inseparable. Biggest, Bigger's wife, tries her best to keep both of them out of trouble.

"I love it." I thread my arm around his neck in a rough hug. Not so much an embrace as a cuff of arms, the clench of friends and family.

Ro looks embarrassed, all the same. "It's not your whole present. For that you have to climb a little farther."

"But it's not even my birthday yet."

"It's your birthday eve. I thought it was only fair to start tonight. Besides, this kind of present is best after sundown." Ro holds out his hand, a wicked look in his eyes.

"Come on. Just one little hint." I squint up at him and he grins.

"But it's a surprise."

"You're making me hike all this way through the brush."

He laughs. "Okay. It's the last thing you'd ever expect. The very last thing." He bounces up and down a bit where he stands, and I can tell he's practically ready to bolt up the mountain.

"What are you talking about?"

He shakes his head, holding out his hand again. "You'll see."

I take it. There's no getting Ro to talk when he doesn't want to. Besides, his hand in mine is a good thing.

I feel the beating of his heart, the pulse of his adrenaline.

Even now, when he's relaxed and hiking, and it's just the two of us. He is a coiled spring. He has no resting state, not really.

Not Ro.

A shadow crosses the hillside, and instinctively we dive for cover under the brush. The ship in the sky is sleek and silver, glinting ominously with the last reflective rays of the setting sun. I shiver, even though I'm not at all cold, and my face is half buried in Ro's warm shoulder.

I can't help it.

Ro murmurs into my ear as if he is talking to one of the Padre's puppies. It's more his tone than the words—that's how you speak to scared animals. "Don't be afraid, Dol. It's headed up the coast, probably to Goldengate. They never come this far inland, not here. They're not coming for us."

"You don't know that." The words sound grim in my mouth, but they're true.

"I do."

He slips his arm around me and we wait like that until the sky is clear.

Because he doesn't know. Not really.

People have hidden in these bushes for centuries, long before us. Long before there were ships in the skies.

First the Chumash lived here, then the Rancheros, then the Spanish missionaries, then the Californians, then the Americans, then the Grass. Which is me, at least since

the Padre brought me back as a baby to La Purísima, our old Grass Mission, in the hills beyond the ocean.

These hills.

The Padre tells it like a story; he was on a crew searching for survivors in the silent city after The Day, only there were none. Whole city blocks were quiet as rain. Finally, he heard a tiny sound—so small, he thought he was imagining it—and there I was, crying purple-faced in my crib. He wrapped me in his coat and brought me home, just as he now brings us stray dogs.

It was also the Padre who taught me the history of these hills as we sat by the fire at night, along with the constellations of the stars and the phases of the moon. The names of the people who knew our land before we did.

Maybe it was supposed to be like this. Maybe this, the Occupation, the Embassies, all of it, maybe this is just another part of nature. Like the seasons of a year, or how a caterpillar turns into a cocoon. The water cycle. The tides.

*Chumash Rancheros Spaniards Californians Americans
Grass.*

Sometimes I repeat the names of my people, all the people who have ever lived in my Mission. I say the names and I think, *I am them and they are me.*

I am the Misión La Purísima de Concepción de la Santísima Virgen María, founded in Las Californias on the Day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the

Blessed Virgin, on the Eighth Day of the Twelfth Month
of the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred
Eighty-Seven. Three hundred years ago.

*Chumash Rancheros Spaniards Californians Americans
Grass.*

When I say the names they're not gone, not to me.
Nobody died. Nothing ended. We're still here.

I'm still here.

That's all I want. To stay. And for Ro to stay, and the
Padre. For us to stay safe, everyone here on the Mission.

But as I look back down the mountain I know that
nothing stays, and the gold flush and fade of everything
tells me that the sun is setting now.

No one can stop it from going. Not even me.